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DEPARTMENT FOR IO/MPR

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SUBJECT: UNGA: FIFTH COMMITTEE DISCUSSES PATTERN OF
CONFERENCES

REF: USUN NEW YORK 878

¶1. On Friday, October 31, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) Fifth Committee (Administrative and Budgetary) held formal consultations on agenda item 121: Pattern of Conferences. Member States considered The Secretary-General's (SYG's) report on pattern of conferences (A/63/119 and A/63/119 Add.1), and the Committee on Conferences (CoC) report (A/63/21), the audit of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) on hiring temporary language staff (A/63/94), and a report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative Budgetary Questions (ACABQ)(A/63/509). Member States addressed the draft resolution, measures to improve conference management efficiency, Integrated Global Management (IGM), official languages, language staff shortages, the impact of the Capital Master Plan (CMP), timely issuance of documentation, and the appropriate use of UN facilities for meetings, conferences, special events, and exhibits.

¶2. The CoC Chairman introduced his report. (See reftel for relevant issues.) Under Secretary-General (USYG) for the Department of General Assembly Conference Management (DGACM), Mr. Shaaban M. Shaaban introduced the SYG's report and discussed specific initiatives to improving conference management. These presentations were followed by interventions by representatives of Antigua and Barbuda (on behalf of the G-77), France (on behalf of the EU), the Philippines, Angola (on behalf of the African Group), the United States, Syria, Russia, Pakistan, Cuba, Iran, and China.

¶3. The representatives of Antigua and Barbuda and Angola reiterated the importance of IGM, an information technology initiative, and a balanced division of labor between HQ and other duty stations to improve language services. France again reminded the Committee of the essential nature of delivering services in all six official languages. The French delegation also announced that it would be ready to support the CoC resolution as it currently stands. When the Cuban representative raised the issue of equal treatment of all Spanish-speaking countries, Shaaban indicated that this is the first he had heard on the subject from Cuba, and that the Secretariat already has a working group to assess language programs.

¶4. Language staff shortages: Retaining language staff (translators and interpreters) remains a serious difficulty for the UN. The Philippine delegation cited that 25 percent of UN linguists are retiring between 2007 and 2011, which, according to Shaaban, renders the "demographic transition" more acute and may degrade the quality of service. Although the shortage exists at all duty stations, the problem is most severe in Nairobi, where, according to the Angolan representative, 35 percent of linguist positions are perennially unfilled. Shaaban encouraged the Member States to approve a temporary waiver on the earnings cap for retirees, increase workdays from 125 to 185, and raise the mandatory retirement age from 62. (Reftel reports that

significant retirements were raised in the September CoC session.) The Angolan representative called for grade increases as incentives for staff to serve in Nairobi. The representative of Cuba called for UN partnerships with linguistic institutions in Latin America.

¶15. Impact of CMP: Shaaban called the CMP "the mother of all renovation projects" and said the newly adopted strategy will shorten the time needed for completion. The representative of Antigua and Barbuda called for uninterrupted continuation of its services during the multi-year project. Shaaban warned that realistically there will be a somewhat of a disruption in some conference services. Nonetheless, Shaaban reminded Member States that the Secretariat would do its best to ensure that the quality of conference servicing is not significantly impacted by the CMP renovation.

¶16. Late issuance of documents: Representatives of Antigua and Barbuda and the Philippines expressed concern over the late issuance of documentation, which can often hinder the work of intergovernmental bodies and especially the Fifth Committee. Shaaban reminded delegations that first documents must be submitted to DGACM on time before the Department can issue the documents. If DGACM does not receive documents from their authors on time, the DGACM will necessarily have delays in issuance. Shaaban emphasized that "We (DGACM) cannot issue documents we don't have."

¶17. Use of UN premises: The representative of Antigua and Barbuda amplified a concern in the CoC report about the use of UN premises for private purposes not in harmony with UN principles, which may create the impression of misuse. After the not-for-profit United Against a Nuclear Iran (UANI) held E

two panel discussions on UN premises, Iranian representatives expressed concern about provisions granting limited use of conference rooms for non-governmental organizations. Shaaban noted that there is a process for reserving space on UN premises. If organizations are in compliant with the rules (ST/AI/416), they may be granted use of the conference room. (Comment: Mission was not/not an event sponsor. Secretariat and Shaaban confirmed that Mission and UANI complied with the Secretariat's policies. End Comment.)

¶18. Regional group meetings: The representative of Antigua and Barbuda advocated increased use of UN facilities by major groupings such as the G-77 and Non-Aligned Movement "on a permanent basis." Shaaban pushed back on the idea of subgroups' use of facilities at UN expense, "We cannot afford it."

¶19. Voting machines: The representative of Antigua and Barbuda was also concerned about an October 13 incident when several Member States were prevented from voting in the Fourth Committee under Article 19 due to non-payment of UN dues, despite an UNGA resolution granting them a waiver. Shaaban replied that the resolution had passed only hours earlier and the Secretariat had not had time to adjust the voting machine.

¶10. USDel remarks focused on efficient use of resources. Remarks are available in full at the Mission's web site, www.usunnewyork.usmission.gov. Khalilzad